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A Living Hope:  
First Peter as a Model for Preaching Eschatology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Abstract

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By Douglas F. Scharf

Eschatology plays a central role in the church's interpretation of Scripture and deeply shapes the liturgical practices of the Christian community; and yet, there exists a noticeable lack of eschatological preaching within many contemporary Christian congregations. In the midst of an increasing secular cultural context, there remains a relatively constant belief in heaven and, in recent years, an apparent resurgence of interest in the possibilities that exist beyond the horizon of our present reality. The church would presumably be well-equipped to respond to this resurgent interest concerning the future of the world. Yet despite the depth and sophistication of scriptural and liturgical traditions, many Christian congregations seem ill-equipped to join the cultural conversation about our future hope. This present project will demonstrate that in order for the church to offer a compelling narrative about the future – one that has the capacity to renew and transform lives – it must reclaim its eschatological voice, principally through the ministry of preaching. Specifically, my argument will focus on the New Testament Epistle of First Peter as a model for preaching eschatology in the twenty-first century. Through an ethnographic study of one Episcopal congregation and an exegetical analysis of portions of First Peter, I will explore four deficiencies in eschatological thinking and living. These four deficiencies include a lack of a clear *telos* or goal of the Christian life; confusion regarding the role of heaven within Christian eschatology; misunderstanding concerning the implications of eschatology for *this world*; and difficulty connecting eschatology to daily life. The final section of this project presents four possible trajectories for preaching and the work of reclaiming our eschatological voice in Christian proclamation.

A Living Hope:  
First Peter as a Model for Preaching Eschatology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Introduction

Nearly fifty years ago, in 1971, John Lennon issued his now famous sociological and theological dare to “imagine there’s no heaven.”<sup>1</sup> During the intervening decades, however, most Americans have not stepped up to Lennon’s challenge. As recent as 2014, the vast majority of Americans continued to express a persistent belief in heaven.<sup>2</sup> Even among atheists, agnostics, and others who identify themselves as religious “nones,” more than one-third say they believe in the existence of heaven.<sup>3</sup> Recent books about the reality of heaven have become instant *New York Times* bestsellers and Hollywood has produced blockbuster films about reported “miracles” from heaven.<sup>4</sup> It would seem that the American cultural imagination is far from abandoning its curiosity with heaven in particular, and eschatology more generally. To the contrary, despite the dawning of “the secular age,” there has been an apparent resurgence of interest in the possibilities that exist beyond the horizon of our present reality.

The church would presumably be well-equipped to respond to this resurgent interest concerning the future of the world. After all, Christian scriptural and liturgical traditions express frequently and confidently the fervent belief that “God is at work in the created order restoring all things to their intended splendor.”<sup>5</sup> Both the Old and New Testaments convey a vision of

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<sup>1</sup> John Lennon, “Imagine,” *John Lennon-Imagine Lyrics*, accessed January 12, 2018, [www.metrolyrics.com/imagine-lyrics-john-lennon.html](http://www.metrolyrics.com/imagine-lyrics-john-lennon.html).

<sup>2</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

<sup>4</sup> Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent, *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astonishing Story of his Trip to Heaven* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010). This book, which chronicles the near-death experience of a young boy, became a national *New York Times* bestseller and was adapted into a major motion picture in 2014. Although the veracity of the story has since been called into question, the widespread popularity of the book and movie is evidence of the persistent cultural interest in matters pertaining to heaven and the afterlife.

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl Bridges Johns, “Eschatology,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*. Ed. Paul Scott Wilson. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 456.

promise and judgment, a vision of a new heaven and new earth in which the *shalom* of God reigns over a restored creation.<sup>6</sup> The ancient creeds of the Church speak of Jesus as the one who “will come again to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.” These same creeds declare the Christian belief in “the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”<sup>7</sup> These scriptural and liturgical affirmations are most succinctly stated in the ancient *mysterium fidei* (mystery of faith): Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. It is evident that the Church, both in its reading of the Bible and its practice of public worship, possesses the necessary language and tools to respond to the growing confusion concerning eschatology and our future hope for the world.

Yet despite the depth and sophistication of scriptural and liturgical traditions, many Christian congregations seem ill-equipped to join the cultural conversation about what exists beyond the horizons of our present reality. This lack of eschatological vision within many Christian denominations can be understood, in part, as a reaction against eschatological views espoused within certain segments of the American evangelical movement of the late twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> More broadly, the diminishment of eschatological vision can be attributed to the

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<sup>6</sup> Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 65:17 speak of the future emergence of “new heavens and a new earth” as part of the promises given to the renewed and restored people of God. In the New Testament, these promises are interpreted Christologically in passages such as Revelation 21:1-5, in which it is Jesus as “the One seated on the throne” who declares, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

<sup>7</sup> Phyllis Tickle and Jon M. Sweeney, *The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy is Shaping the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 57-59. The creedal affirmation of Jesus’ return “to judge the living and the dead” was part of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea (325 CE), while the statement of belief in “the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come” was added at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople (381 CE).

<sup>8</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995), 1-32. This novel and the series of books that followed recount the unfolding of apocalyptic events based on a literal-historical reading of the Book of Revelation. The central event within the narrative is the sudden *rapture* of a large segment of the human population. The theology of the rapture espoused in this novel is based on a misguided reading of First Thessalonians 4:15-17. Nevertheless, the books and movies associated with the *Left Behind* series have remained hugely popular within the evangelical movement in America during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

general cultural process of secularization, most especially the loss of transcendence within the modern worldview.<sup>9</sup> As one commentator has observed, “the contemporary imagination is held captive in the closed circle of extant reality.”<sup>10</sup> The church is not immune from this lack of transcendent imagination. In large part, the church has “accepted the terms of the demystified world secularism boasts,” and has thus “failed to address the secular age with a compelling narrative.”<sup>11</sup>

This present project will demonstrate that in order for the church to offer “a compelling narrative” – one that has the capacity to renew and transform lives – it must reclaim its eschatological voice, principally through the ministry of preaching. Specifically, my argument will focus on the New Testament Epistle of First Peter as a model for preaching eschatology in the twenty-first century. The first section of this essay examines the results of an ethnographic study of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Tequesta, Florida, which serves as the congregational context for this project. This ethnographic study provides relevant data related to both individual and congregational assumptions regarding the field of eschatology. In the second section, I will provide an exegetical analysis of portions of the New Testament Epistle of First Peter, specifically focused on the eschatological implications of the letter.<sup>12</sup> This exegetical analysis is meant to demonstrate that the Epistle of First Peter can serve as a model for

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<sup>9</sup> David Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World – and our Preaching – Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 50. Lose argues that the contemporary preacher must address three prevailing currents within our present cultural context: post-modernism, secularism, and pluralism. The effect of secularization, in particular, is a general loss of transcendence; we are “urged to look not outward for hope and meaning, but inward toward the quest of human fulfillment and flourishing.”

<sup>10</sup> David M. Greenhaw, “Preaching and eschatology: opening a new world in preaching.” *Journal for Preachers* 12, no. 3 (1989): 3.

<sup>11</sup> Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> The scope of this project will not permit a comprehensive analysis of the eschatology of First Peter. Thus, I have chosen to focus my exegetical analysis on chapter one of the letter as well as selected verses from other portions of the letter that relate to the theme of eschatology.

responding to the congregational issues identified in section one. Finally, drawing from the ethnographic work described in section one as well as the exegetical insights of section two, the third section of this paper explores specific trajectories for preaching that can be implemented in a congregational context.

## **I. Reevaluating our Eschatological Thinking: A Congregational Analysis**

### *Ministry Context*

The ethnographic study that is described below is focused on the congregational context at Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Tequesta, Florida. Good Shepherd is a program-sized congregation that is located in the incorporated village of Tequesta, an affluent, suburban community situated in northern Palm Beach County. The membership of Good Shepherd is predominantly white, which is reflective of our surrounding community, and is comprised of both older retirees and younger families. Currently, the average Sunday attendance is approximately 290, which is significantly higher during the winter months, due to the influx of seasonal residents. Good Shepherd is a member of the Episcopal Church and worldwide Anglican Communion, which means our common life is rooted in the liturgical and sacramental practices associated with the Book of Common Prayer and Anglican hymnody.

### *Ethnographic Methods*

The ethnographic study of Good Shepherd included multiple means of data collection. First, I conducted two successive Bible study groups; the first focused on the theme of biblical eschatological in general, while the second focused specifically on the eschatology of First Peter. Secondly, I gathered a diverse representation of church members to serve as focus groups, which discussed specific questions related to the topic of eschatology. Third, I taught a four-week adult



education class on the topic of heaven and the Christian hope. Finally, I conducted a congregational survey, which attempted to capture general attitudes and assumptions regarding the field of eschatology.<sup>13</sup> The ethnographic study was conducted over a period of approximately six months.

### *Results and Analysis*

The following conclusions are drawn primarily from the responses to the congregational survey, although supporting evidence is provided from the general discussion in the Bible study sessions, focus group meetings, and adult education classes. The analysis of the data was focused around the following guiding questions:

1. Did the respondents articulate a clear *telos* toward which the Christian life is oriented?
2. How did the respondents describe heaven?
3. Did the respondents articulate an exclusively “other worldly” eschatological vision?
4. How did the respondents relate eschatology to the present reality of their daily lives?

Using these four questions as a guide, I drew the following conclusions from the data collected through the congregational survey and small group studies. These conclusions provide the framework for the exegetical analysis of First Peter (Section Two) and the exploration of possible trajectories for preaching (Section Three).

1. *A majority of the survey respondents expressed a sense of hopefulness with regard to the coming of God’s future kingdom; there was, however, a lack of a clearly defined telos or goal toward which we are striving.*

When asked how they felt about the “end of the world” or “God’s future kingdom, over sixty-one percent of respondents described feeling “hopeful,” while just under twenty-three

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<sup>13</sup> See *Appendix A*. This appendix provides an overview of the ethnographic methods used in my congregational analysis. Graphs for the quantitative component of the congregational survey are also provided.

percent expressed indifference or confusion. Less than two percent of respondents selected “fearful” as their primary emotional response to the topic of eschatology.<sup>14</sup> These results indicate an overall sense of wellbeing and positivity regarding the future of the world. This expressed hopefulness is somewhat surprising, since many of the small group participants articulated a sense of dismay at the current state of the world as well as concern regarding what they considered to be a fear-based eschatological vision espoused by some in the American evangelical movement of the past fifty years.<sup>15</sup> The survey results indicate that despite these concerns, the majority of respondents possess a general sense of hopefulness about the future.

However, a general sense of hopefulness is not the same as possessing a clear sense of purpose and vision for the future. When asked to describe the “Christian hope for the future,” most respondents could not articulate a clear vision or *telos* toward which we are called to strive. Some respondents described the Christian hope using vague, generic terms such as “eternal life” or “life after death.” Others expressed a desire to be “united with loved ones” or to simply “be in God’s presence.” Still others admitted to experiencing “doubt” and “unbelief” when it comes to the traditional teaches regarding eschatology and the future of the world. Therefore, whereas the survey results clearly indicate that a majority of respondents are *hopeful* about the future, it remains unclear *what they are hoping for*.

A small subset of respondents did articulate a more concrete understanding of the *telos* or *goal* toward which the Christian life is oriented. These respondents described the Christian hope in terms of “new creation” and expressed a vision of a renewed world characterized by “love”

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix A. Question 4 and corresponding graph.

<sup>15</sup> Appendix A. The discussion that ensued during the Bible Study sessions and Focus Groups demonstrated a general sense confusion regarding the nature of Christian *hope*. Most participants expressed a clear sense of hopefulness in God and confidence, albeit tentative, that God’s purpose for the world will ultimately prevailed. Yet the participants were simultaneously dismayed and disillusioned by the current state of the world, which is characterized by violence and division.

and “justice.” Among the various descriptions of this renewed world, the image of God’s “peace” was a central theme in many of the survey responses and small group discussions. However, as we will see in a later section, this vision of the future was not firmly rooted in the present reality of world. In other words, there was a lack of connection between our Christian *hope* for the future and the Christian *life* of discipleship in the present. This lack of connection may be due, in part, to consistently espoused misperception of heaven, the topic to which we now turn.

2. *The majority of respondents described heaven as a destination away from this world.*

Given the centrality of *heaven* within the traditional understanding of Christian eschatology, it seemed prudent to explore this topic specifically in relation to my congregational analysis. The notion of heaven is often connected to one of two dichotomies. On the one hand, *heaven* is frequently understood in contrast to *earth*. In this sense, heaven refers to the cosmos beyond the confines of our earthly existence. On the other hand, *heaven* has historically been contrasted with *hell*. In this sense, heaven and hell refer to the eternal destinations of the righteous and unrighteous respectively. Both of these dichotomies perpetuate an understanding of heaven as a place *away from this world* and thus disconnected from the Christian pilgrimage on earth.<sup>16</sup>

The survey results and small group discussion confirmed that a majority of the members of my congregation subscribe to one or both of the dichotomies described above. Nearly thirty-seven percent of those surveyed described the Christian hope as “going to heaven when you

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 3-4. Morse outlines the common understanding of heaven in contrast to either earth or hell. In either case, heaven is viewed primarily as away from this world. Morse argues that the Bible, particularly the New Testament, portrays heaven as “that which is coming to pass.”

die.”<sup>17</sup> Several other respondents described life after death in terms of “going to a better place” or connecting with “something beyond this world.”<sup>18</sup> Even among the respondents who expressed indifference or confusion about “life after death,” the reality they hope is real is described as *away from this world*. This view of heaven is reinforced in the lyrics of popular hymns such as *Away in the manger*, the text of which includes the petition, “bless all the dear children in thy tender care and *take us to heaven* to live with thee there.”<sup>19</sup>

Among of the participants in the small group discussions and adult education classes, there was a similar view of heaven consistently espoused. When ask to describe *heaven*, the small group participants uniformly described a place, a destination to which we “ascend” or “translocate.” Heaven and earth were conceived of as two distinct spatial realities. Interestingly, when asked to describe hell, the vast majority of participants described an *experience*, not a place. They used words such “torment” or “judgment.” Hell was consistently conceived of as the *experience* of the absence of God. However, despite these experiential descriptions of hell, heaven remained firmly described as a distinct destination *away from this world*. Remarkably, this “otherworldly” conception of eschatology was not unique to those who described the Christian hope as “going to heaven when we die.”

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<sup>17</sup> Appendix A, Congregational Survey, Question 5 and corresponding graph.

<sup>18</sup> Appendix A, Congregational Survey, Question 6, Respondents 32 and 41.

<sup>19</sup> Author Unknown, “Away in a manger,” *Public Domain*, accessed on January 12, 2018, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/away-in-a-manger-lyrics-christmas-carols.html>. See also Chris Tomlin, “Home,” *Never Lose Sight* (SixSteps Records, 2016), accessed on January 12, 2018, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/home-lyrics-chris-tomlin.html>. In addition to the text of traditional hymns such as “Away in a manger,” more recent contemporary worship songs continue to reinforce the image of heaven as a reality away from this world. Chris Tomlin’s “Home” speaks about heaven in terms of “going home” to “a better place.”

3. *Even the respondents that described the Christian hope in terms of participating in God's new creation expressed an escapist, otherworldly understanding of eschatology.*

When asked which word or phrase would best describe their understanding of the Christian hope, nearly one-third of the respondents selected “participating in God’s new creation” as their answer. These were often the same respondents who described the future as a world characterized by “love,” “justice,” and “peace.” However, a more thorough analysis of these responses reveals that even though these individuals describe the Christian hope in terms of “new creation,” they remain ensnared by the “otherworldly” conceptions of eschatology that seem to dominate the imagination of a majority of Christians. One participant expressed hope that “God has a plan for righteous souls beyond life on this earth.”<sup>20</sup> This response clearly expresses an eschatological hope that is disconnected from “life on this earth,” but also betrays a “disembodied” eschatology in which the “righteous *soul*” is the continuing object of life and immortality.<sup>21</sup> The conception of a disembodied eschatological reality was expressed by one another respondent who articulated a vision of the future in which “all *spirits* will live in harmony.”<sup>22</sup> Yet another respondent described the Christian hope as “being released from our *physical* world [...] to reside in a perfect *spiritual* existence.”<sup>23</sup> This response, which articulates an eschatological vision that moves from the *physical* to the *spiritual*, once again fails to

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<sup>20</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 6, Respondent 8.

<sup>21</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 28. With reference to the word *soul*, Wright argues that when it does occur in the New Testament, it “reflects underlying Hebrew and Aramaic words referring not to a disembodied entity hidden within the outer shell of the disposable body, but rather to what we would call the whole person.”

<sup>22</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Questions 5 and 6, Respondent 20. – This respondent, who described the Christian hope as “being raised from the dead with Christ,” went on to describe resurrection as “being out of our human body and transformed into our internal being.”

<sup>23</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 6, Respondent 16

recognize the implications of eschatology for the Christian life *in this world*. The disconnection between the *physical* and the *spiritual*, between *this creation* and *God's new creation*, is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that a majority of respondents could not sufficiently connect eschatology to their daily life as a Christian nor to the ongoing mission of the church.

4. *Among the majority of the respondents, there was an inability to articulate a clear and compelling connection between our future hope and our present reality.*

The final two questions of the congregational survey focused on the connection between eschatology and daily life. As David Lose has argued, the rise of secularism has “resulted in a loss of hope not simply or even primarily in an eternal future, but rather in the value and meaningfulness of the present.”<sup>24</sup> People are asking “whether what we spend our time and energy on in *this life* has even a modicum of enduring worth or value.”<sup>25</sup> The lack of clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life described above is a major factor contributing to this sense of meaningless and futility. When faced with the uncertainty, ambiguity, and possible meaninglessness of the world, many find themselves wrestling with the fundamental existential question: “Does the life we are constructing and living make sense?”<sup>26</sup>

Among those who participated in the small group Bible studies and adult education classes, there was extensive discussion about the connection between eschatology and every daily life; however, it was clearly a topic that a majority of the participants had not encountered before. The survey responses reflect a wide diversity of perspectives and ideas related to the impact of eschatology in the present. For some, there was no immediate connection between the

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<sup>24</sup> Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Christian hope for the future and the reality of daily life. When asked how eschatology influences their daily lives, several respondents said, “I don’t think it does” or “not much.”<sup>27</sup> One respondent only related eschatology to the experience of death: “I do not think about it much because I am not at death’s door.”<sup>28</sup> Yet another respondent confidently stated, “I can relax and be assured that all is well!”<sup>29</sup> When asked to consider the difference our future hope makes for the mission of the church, several respondents simply answered, “not certain” or “not sure how to answer.”<sup>30</sup>

Among those who provided a more an expanded answer to the questions related to daily life and the mission of the church, many of the responses offered only general descriptions of basic Christian ideals. For example, several respondents stated that they attempt “to give kindness,” “to make a difference,” and “to love one another.”<sup>31</sup> Other respondents simply expressed a desire “to be a better Christian” or “to set a good example in the world.”<sup>32</sup> A small set of respondents articulated a desire to “strive for justice and peace” and to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” which are commitments expressed in the Episcopal baptismal liturgy.<sup>33</sup> These sentiments represent basic Christian values or ideals, but they do not necessarily require a belief in an eschatological vision in order to fulfill them. In other words, a person can be kind

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<sup>27</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 7, Respondents 2, 14, 18, and 53.

<sup>28</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 7, Respondent 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 7, Respondent 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 7, Respondents 9 and 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 8, Respondents 24, 32, and 33. The desire to make a difference and grow in love and faithfulness was a common theme throughout the survey results.

<sup>32</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 8, Respondents 24 32 33 51, and 54. The most commonly expressed connection between eschatology and mission was a desire “to be a better Christian.”

<sup>33</sup> *Appendix A*, Congregational Survey, Question 8, Respondents 1 and 37.

and loving without giving any thought to the placement of these actions within the larger schema of God's future for the world.

### *Summary of Congregational Analysis*

The analysis of my congregational context has demonstrated a willingness to engage the topic of eschatology, while also revealing a significant deficiency in theological language and understanding regarding the future hope we have in Christ. There is a lack of a clearly define *telos* related to the Christian faith, including a limited understanding of the theological depth of the biblical concept of heaven. Moreover, a majority of the respondents struggled to articulate a well-defined correlation between our future hope and the realities of daily life. The next section will explore the ways in which the New Testament epistle of First Peter can serve as a model for addressing the eschatological confusion evidenced by the analysis above.

## **II. Reimagining our Eschatological Vision: An Exegetical Analysis of First Peter**

The previous section, which examined the attitudes and perceptions related to eschatology in the context of one Episcopal congregation, identified the following four areas of deficiency with regard to our understanding and application of the Christian hope for the future:

1. *Lack of clarity regarding the telos of the Christian life*
2. *Confusion regarding the role of heaven in Christian eschatology*
3. *Misunderstanding about the implications of eschatology for "this world"*
4. *Difficulty connecting eschatology to everyday life*

In this section, I will explore the ways in which the ancient epistle of First Peter speaks to each of these four deficiencies and the apparent confusion regarding Christian eschatology in our contemporary context. First Peter seeks to address the unique challenges related to living the



Christian life faithfully in a non-Christian society. According to biblical scholar, Eugene Boring, the “single-mindedness” with which First Peter addresses these issues may make it “the most significant book in the New Testament.”<sup>34</sup> The vision of the faithful Christian life as espoused in the epistle of First Peter is deeply eschatological. As Peter Davids observes, “the whole of First Peter is characterized by an eschatological, even apocalyptic, focus.”<sup>35</sup> This eschatological focus informs and shapes the theological and ethical vision of the letter; as Boring notes, the letter is “permeated with eschatology; it is not a marginal or isolable element with which the author could dispense.”<sup>36</sup> With the eschatological character of the letter established, we now turn to the specific ways in which First Peter speaks to the deficiencies in eschatological thinking described above.

#### *Hope and the Telos of the Christian Life*

The first deficiency we noted is the apparent lack of clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life. The congregational analysis revealed that a majority of respondents expressed a general sense of *hopefulness* for the future, but also an inability to articulate precisely *what they are hoping for*. This absence of a defined *telos* or *goal* toward which we are striving inevitably leads to a sense of futility and purposelessness. David Lose attributes this lack of clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life to what he calls the “crisis of immanence;” we have

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<sup>34</sup> Eugene M. Boring, *1 Peter*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 64.

<sup>35</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 15. Elliot makes a distinction between *eschatological* and *apocalyptic* discourse, and argues that throughout First Peter “the perspective is eschatological but without any apocalyptic shadowing.

<sup>36</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 64.

become disconnected from the larger story of God’s vision for the world and thus disoriented with regards to our participation in the grand drama of God’s plan of salvation.<sup>37</sup>

First Peter speaks confidently about the ultimate *telos* of the Christian life and our place in the larger story of God’s redemptive plan for the world. Peter tells his community, “you are receiving the outcome (*telos*) of your faith, the salvation of your soul” (1:9). The *telos* or *goal* of the Christian life, according to Peter, is the experience of *salvation*, which as Elliot observes, “has both a present and future aspect;” it is “inaugurated but not yet completed.”<sup>38</sup> The *present* reality of salvation is evidenced by the experience of “new birth” made accessible through baptism, which “*now* saves you” (3:21). However, there remains a *future* culmination (*telos*) that will be accomplished when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:7). For Peter, the theological virtue that sustains the life of the believer “in-between” the present experience of salvation and its future consummation is *hope*.<sup>39</sup>

Later in his letter, Peter declares to his community, “the end of all things is near” (4:7). The Greek word translated “end” is, in fact, *telos*. Thus, this verse could alternatively be translated as “the completion or fulfillment of all things is near.” Here Peter is encouraging the Christian community to endure and holdfast for the *telos* that will soon be manifested. As Boring observes, “the Christian life for 1 Peter has an essential *future* dimension;” the trajectory of the letter propels the reader toward the ultimate hope that is yet to come.<sup>40</sup> The experience of the Christian life as it is experienced in the context of chronological time (*chronos*) must be

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<sup>37</sup> Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 67.

<sup>38</sup> John Hall Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed. Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 337.

<sup>39</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 65. According to Boring, “*hope* plays an even more decisive role than *faith* [in First Peter] and can serve as the one word that sums up the meaning of the Christian life.”

<sup>40</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 64.

interpreted in light of the larger narrative of salvation, which is only understood in accordance with God's time (*kairos*). The hope that is described in First Peter is a hope that transcends and transforms time. In other words, the *past* event of Christ's resurrection, the *present* experience of new birth, and the *future* promise of salvation together represent the arc of God's saving action throughout time and, therefore, are equally integral to the Christian experience of hope. Consequently, the life of the believer is given meaning and purpose in as much as it is understood within the context of God's story, thus in First Peter "God is praised for having granted a new, eschatological existence to Christian believers, whose lives are lived in the continuum *en route* from God's mighty acts in the past to the imminent fulfillment of God's plan for the world."<sup>41</sup>

These insights from First Peter provide an anecdote to the deficient clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life and our place in the larger narrative of God's vision for the world. First Peter articulates an eschatological vision that enables the Christian to escape the "crisis of immanence" and embrace "a living hope" that is both a present reality and our future inheritance. However, this eschatological vision only makes sense if we first expand and deepen our understanding of the nature of heaven.

*Heaven: Not Just a Destination*

The *telos* of the Christian life as described in First Peter is closely associated with the concept of heaven. This association becomes clear when the reader understands that First Peter moves along both "a temporal axis (movement through time), as described above, and "a spatial axis (moving through space, including from heaven to earth)."<sup>42</sup> In the opening section of the

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<sup>41</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 61.

<sup>42</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 15.

epistle, the author describes three “transforming benefits that believers have received as a result of God’s great mercy and regenerating action.”<sup>43</sup> Two of these benefits, “a living hope” and “a salvation about to be revealed” were discussed above. However, the third benefit, “an imperishable inheritance” is uniquely described as being “kept in heaven” (1:4). The promised inheritance can be understood as “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” precisely because it “not a material but a transcendent reality.”<sup>44</sup> However, it is unclear how the believer accesses this inheritance. It is only attained after death and then only accessible in place called *heaven* away from this world.

According to Boring, within the theological framework of First Peter, “the Christian does not “go up” at death to receive [this inheritance], but goes forward in history to meet it at the eschatological consummation.”<sup>45</sup> Said another way, “when the author is thinking of the inheritance safely kept in heaven for us – he is thinking horizontally, not vertically – we do not go up to heaven to get it, it comes to meet us at the eschaton.”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, it can be said that the eschatological vision of First Peter includes an understanding of heaven that is less a destination *to* which we go when we die and more a dimension *from* which Jesus is revealed and the promised inheritance is received in “the last time” (*en kairo eschato*). In one sense, the Christian community is already living in “the last times” (*eschatos chronos*), the period which included the first appearing or manifestation (*phanero*) of Jesus (1:20). And yet, there is a second, future manifestation (*phanero*) that is yet to come (5:4). It is between these two great

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<sup>43</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 330. The three benefits include the “living hope” resultant from the resurrection of Jesus; the “imperishable inheritance” that is being kept for us in heaven; and the “salvation about to be revealed.” The opening benediction is offered in praise to God for these benefits.

<sup>44</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 336.

<sup>45</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

revelatory moments that the Christian lives and waits. The Christian is waiting not for a final escape *away from this world*, but for the final revelation of Jesus *from heaven*, which will signal the consummation of the new life and hope *already* experienced in the present reality of this world.

### *Eschatological Implications for this World*

So far, we have explored the way in which the epistle of First Peter provides a model for addressing the first two deficiencies identified in the congregational analysis, namely the lack of clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life and confusion concerning the role of heaven in eschatology. We now turn to the third deficiency: a lack of understanding about the implications of eschatology for *this world*. What difference does the Christian hope for the *future* make in the *present*? We have discussed the central theme of *hope*, which pervades the letter of First Peter. However, this vision of hope is intimately connected to the experience *joy*. The three benefits of new birth, namely *hope*, *inheritance*, and *salvation*, are cause for “great rejoicing.” The Greek word used here is *agalliaithe*, which means “to exult with joy” or “shout with joy.”<sup>47</sup> As Boring observes, “this joy is unforced, is not a matter of cranking it up within ourselves by convincing ourselves to have the “right attitude,” but is a response to God’s acts of the past, present, and future.” Davids describes this “joyful, hopeful outlook” as the “intersection” of eschatology and our present-day reality.<sup>48</sup> For Peter, one the most important implications of eschatology for *this world* is the experience of exceedingly great joy!

However, the experience of abundant joy described in First Peter is all the more remarkable because it is encountered even in the midst of suffering. Elliott calls First Peter “the

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<sup>47</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 339.

<sup>48</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 19.

most extensive theological commentary on Christian suffering found in the New Testament.”<sup>49</sup> Central to Peter’s theology of suffering is the conviction that the experience of suffering is not tangential to the Christian life, but is an imitation of and participation in the experience of Jesus (4:1). Boring goes even further and argues that for Peter suffering-for-others “is the innermost reality of the universe, the nature of God revealed in Christ, the given existence of all who are “in Christ.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, “suffering is not a problem to be solved, but the givenness of Christian existence to be lived out.”<sup>51</sup>

The theological “glue” that holds together the experience of suffering-for-others and that of exceedingly great joy is the *eschatological vision* that Peter describes, a vision, which as we have seen, is not focused on an escape *from this world*, but a “living hope” that is *for this world*. As Elliott rightly notes, “the author speaks not of a “new creation [...], but of personal rebirth and transformed communal life in a hostile environment.”<sup>52</sup> Or as Boring observes, “the eschatological existence of the believer, the “living hope” of which First Peter writes (1:3) is not an explanation that *someday* there will be resurrection and things will be different, but a celebration that there has already been a resurrection, and things are *already* different.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, the eschatological vision of First Peter points the reader toward the ultimate *telos* of the Christian life, while simultaneously affirming the *present reality* of new life and vibrant hope. This promise of life and hope are experienced as the Christian participates in both the resurrection of

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<sup>49</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 109.

<sup>50</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 60.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 65.

Jesus from the dead (1:3) and his sufferings in the flesh (4:1). In midst of suffering, the faith of a believer is “tested” and “purified” just as gold is refined by the intense heat of the fire. All of these elements –the testing of our faith, the promise of life and hope, and the experience of joy in the midst of suffering – are part of what Boring calls “the eschatological existence of Christian believers who live in the climatic time of God’s plan for history.”<sup>54</sup> It is clear that the eschatology of First Peter has profound implications for life in *this world* and, therefore, has the potential to significantly shape and transform the daily lives of those who have chosen to follow Jesus.

### *Living Eschatologically in the Present*

Having established that the eschatological vision of First Peter is not “other-worldly,” but has important implications for *this world*, we now turn our attention to the specific ways eschatology influences the daily life of the Christian. The eschatology of First Peter “does not refer to the future in such a way that it can be isolated from the past and present.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, the meaning of the Christian life is only understood in light of the larger narrative of God’s plan for the world. Therefore, eschatology is ultimately “a matter of living in a meaningful history, life in a story-shaped world of which God is the author, not speculation about the future.”<sup>56</sup> To live eschatologically in the present is to understand one’s life as part of God’s story, a story that will lead us and all creation to the “completion or fulfillment of all things” (4:7).

This “eschatological consciousness” – the comprehension of one’s life as part of God’s larger story for the world – “pervades the letter [of First Peter] and animates its ethical

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<sup>54</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

exhortations.”<sup>57</sup> As Boring argues, the eschatological vision that Peter develops at the start of his letter “is not a formality, but a substantial liturgical-theological unit that lays the theological foundations for the practical instruction to follow.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, for Peter, eschatology provides “the basis and essence of practical Christian life in society.”<sup>59</sup> Consequently, the life of the Christian is meant to be an example of holiness and godliness in a society alienated from God. As Davids observes, “if eschatology is the underlying theme of the epistle, holiness is the goal.”<sup>60</sup> Even the controversial household codes, which call for radical submission to earthly authorities, can be understood an example of the Petrine call to holiness and the intimate connection between *eschatology* and *ethics*.<sup>61</sup>

Throughout the letter of First Peter, this connection between *eschatology* and *ethics* is consistently communal in nature. As Elliott observes, “the plethora of collective terms and images employed to emphasize the community forming dynamic of salvation and the communal identity of the redeemed [...] is one of the most striking features of the letter.”<sup>62</sup> The people of God are called to be “living stone” built together into a “spiritual house” (2:5). The eschatological titles bestowed upon the people of Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:5-6) are now attributed to the gathered Christian community, which is identified as “a chosen race, a royal

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<sup>57</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 111.

<sup>58</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 18. Here Davids argues that the household codes are an example of the theme of *imitatio Christi*. Because Christ submitted to human authority even unto death (3:21-24), so the Christian should live a life of submission as an example and witness to the Christ-like life.

<sup>62</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 113.



priesthood, a holy nation, and God’s own people” (2:9). Ultimately, this “holy-set apart community is to lead a holy-set apart way of life.”<sup>63</sup> The communal call to holiness entails having pure hearts (1:22), doing good deeds (1:17), doing what is right (2:14-15), being subordinate and respectful of order (3:1ff), non-retaliation (3:9), pursuing peace (3:11), selflessness (5:2-4), humility (5:5), and gentleness (3:16). The characteristics of a holy life are not disconnected moral injunctions, but rather together define the Christian community as the eschatological people of God. The ultimate Christian hope for the *future*, the anticipated *telos* of the Christian life, empowers the believer to live a life of holiness in the *present* in the context of daily life.

#### *Summary of Exegetical Analysis of First Peter*

The brief exegetical analysis offered above focused specifically on the way in which First Peter provides a model for addressing the four deficiencies in eschatological thinking identified in the congregation analysis outlined in Section One. We discovered that First Peter helps us to see and understand more clearly the *telos* or *goal* of the Christian life, namely the *present* and *future* promise of salvation. In addition, the epistle of First Peter provides important theological insights that deepen our understanding of the role of heaven within our eschatological framework. Finally, we explored the way in which First Peter develops a vision of eschatology that has significant implications for *this world* as well as the capacity to shape Christian practices and attitudes in the context of daily life. However, the question remains as to how the insights and explications drawn from our analysis of First Peter can inform the ministry of proclamation in our postmodern age. How do we reclaim our eschatological voice in order to respond to the

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<sup>63</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation*, 115.

growing confusion regarding eschatology in our congregational contexts? It is this fundamental question that I will seek to address in our next section.

### **III. Reclaiming our Eschatological Voice: Trajectories for Preaching**

In the first section of this paper, I presented the conclusions drawn from the congregational analysis of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church. The results of the congregational analysis demonstrated a lack of clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life; a general sense of confusion regarding the role of heaven in eschatology; a misunderstanding about the implications of eschatology for *this world*; and, finally, difficulty connecting eschatology to everyday life. The second section explored the Epistle of First Peter as a potential model for addressing the four deficiencies identified in the congregational analysis. In the present section, I will first provide a summary of the unique challenges related to eschatological preaching in our contemporary world. I will then draw upon both the ethnographic analysis of my congregation as well as the exegetical analysis of First Peter in order to identify specific “trajectories” for preaching eschatology in the church today.

#### *The Challenge of Eschatological Preaching*

As previously noted, one of the most persistent challenges to the preaching of eschatology is the rise of secularism and the corresponding loss of transcendence. The ministry of proclamation has in no way been immune to the influences of the cultural forces. As David Greenhaw observes, “much of contemporary preaching has assumed God is finished with the world. It has assumed that what you see is what you get; ... it has lost its imagination for a new

world and is circumscribed in the closed circle of extant reality.”<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, if preaching no longer has the capacity to imagine a new world, it is little wonder that congregations lack the necessary imagination to envisage the power and beauty of the Christian hope for the future. Similarly, if the preacher him- or herself is ensnared by what Lose refers to as the “crisis of immanence,” it is no surprise that many in our congregations demonstrate a lack of clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life and struggle to connect eschatology to the present realities of everyday life.

This scarcity of eschatological vision has not always plagued the practice of Christian preaching. Tom Long reminds us that “those who preach today are the heirs of preachers in a not-too-distant past who spoke often, clearly, and confidently of the Christian hope for all people for all of creation.”<sup>65</sup> American preachers over the last two hundred years have explored various topics related to biblical eschatology, “but by the close of the twentieth century a veil of embarrassment had been thrown over the whole matter.”<sup>66</sup> This embarrassment related to eschatological preaching is not only due to the rise of secularism and corresponding “skepticism of the world,” but also the “long history of critical dissolution of the eschatological conceptions exhibited in the Bible.”<sup>67</sup> As Wolfhart Pannenberg asserts, “the biblical expressions of eschatological hope [...] have been dismissed as dependent on now obsolete cultural conditions and on a limited knowledge of natural processes.”<sup>68</sup> These criticisms, which originate from both

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<sup>64</sup> Greenhaw, “Preaching and Eschatology,” 3.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2009), 112.

<sup>66</sup> Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 112.

<sup>67</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Task of Christian Eschatology,” in *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 2-3.

<sup>68</sup> Pannenberg, “The Task of Christian Eschatology,” 3.

secular culture and the academic fields of biblical and theological studies, have led to the significant diminishment of eschatological preaching from American pulpits.<sup>69</sup> With these challenges as the backdrop, and using the insights gleaned from both the congregational analysis and exegetical study of First Peter, I offer four possible trajectories for preaching and the work of reclaiming our eschatological voice in Christian proclamation.

*Trajectory 1: Preaching the Christian Telos.* The first trajectory relates to the proclamation of the *telos* of the Christian life, the ultimate hope toward which are moving and for which we are laboring. As Boring reminds us, “human life itself is forward-looking, is stretched out on a temporal line that moves toward the future. Human life is constituted by this movement; to have something to ‘look forward to’ is to have something to live for. To have no tomorrow is to be robbed of today; to be given a future is to be given a present.”<sup>70</sup> The proclamation of the Christian *telos* is exemplified by the introductory section of First Peter, in which the Christian community is reminded of the rebirth they have received as well as the corresponding *hope, inheritance, and salvation* that is theirs through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1:3-5). The outward and visible sign of the gift of new birth is the waters of baptism and the resultant experience of forgiveness and renewal. However, the experience of new life given through baptism in the *present* will one day reach its *future* completion and fulfillment “in the last time” when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:7). It is only the promise of the *future* consummation that ultimately gives meaning and substance to the experience hope in the *present*. This teleological dimension of preaching is best expressed by Tom Long who states,

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<sup>69</sup> Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 112. The congregational survey results noted in *Appendix A* also demonstrate a lack of eschatological preaching. Nearly fifty percent of respondents stated they “almost never” hear sermons about “the second coming of Jesus” or “the end of the world,” with an additional forty-two percent citing only “occasional” exposure to preaching on the Christian hope.

<sup>70</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 64.

“eschatological preaching affirms that life under the providence of God has a shape, and that shape is end-stressed; what happens in the middle is finally defined by the end.”<sup>71</sup>

However, it is important to emphasize that the proclamation of the Christian *telos* should never be sentimentalized or reduced to comforting platitudes. Rather, the bold declaration that our journey with Christ is moving toward an ultimate point of completion and fulfillment must take into account the very real *tension* that is experienced in the life of faith. This is what David Schlafer and Timothy Sedgwick call the “tensive/telic character of good preaching.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, the forward-looking life of faith that we are called to live is in constant tension with the frequent experiences of disillusionment and despair that characterize the human condition. The eschatological preacher engages both of these realities; “as they prepare sermons, preachers are listening, both hermeneutically and homiletically, for an interplay between ... the *tension* and *telos* that are present in Scripture and in our lives. By depicting and conveying tension, effective Gospel sermons lead listeners into a *telos*, a purpose that is ‘larger than life’ as currently envisioned and experienced.”<sup>73</sup>

The preacher is called to proclaim boldly the *good news* that the ordinary, unceasing procession of time is not without meaning or purpose, but is rather moving toward a *telos*, a time in which we will see and experience the completion and fulfillment of God’s vision for the world. As Karl Barth reminds us, we are continually challenged to behold a vision of time in which God is active and present, refusing to worship “a God called Chronos.”<sup>74</sup> Instead of

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<sup>71</sup> Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 126.

<sup>72</sup> David J. Schlafer and Timothy F. Sedgwick, *Preaching What We Practice: Proclamation and Moral Discernment*, (Harrisburg, PA.: Morehouse, 2007), 74.

<sup>73</sup> Schlafer, *Preaching What We Practice*, 73.

<sup>74</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.2, trans. T H. L. Farker et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 456.

plodding along on “a treadmill of vaunted human achievements that produces an exclusively human product,” we are empowered to make the claim that Jesus Christ is himself the *telos* of history: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again!<sup>75</sup> This declaration does not empty human achievement of meaning, but rather reminds us that the whole of our life and labor are moving in a particular direction – toward the day when Christ will be *all in all*.

*Trajectory2. Preaching Heaven.* The second trajectory for preaching directs our attention to our assumptions regarding the nature of heaven. The effective preaching of the Christian *telos* must also address the deficiency of imagination regarding the role of heaven in our eschatological vision. As we explored above, the majority of participants in the congregational analysis conceived of heaven almost exclusively as a location *away from this world*, the ultimate destination for righteous souls. According to Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, throughout history “Christian hope has consistently been understood as hope for human fulfillment in another world (‘heaven’) rather than as hope for the eternal future of this world in which we live.”<sup>76</sup> Contemporary spiritual writer and pastor, Brian McLaren, argues that we have turned the announcement of God’s glorious vision for the future of this world into “an evacuation plan” out of this world.<sup>77</sup> The reclamation of our eschatological voice must include a reimagining of our conceptualizations of heaven.

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<sup>75</sup> William H. Willimon, “Time Made Strange: Preaching in Ordinary Time.” *Interpretation* 67, no. 3 (July 2013), 260. Willimon is specifically addressing the need to recapture our eschatological voice in the age in which the church has “degenerated into a settled institution of culture.” According to Willimon, the church has acquiesced too much to the “self-help, self-actualized, self-saved” culture in which it finds itself.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 129.

<sup>77</sup> Brian McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 211. The image of “evacuation” is also associated with the doctrine of the rapture, which has been popularized by the Tim LaHaye series, *Left Behind*.

One possible pathway toward this reimagining of heaven is to reclaim the language of resurrection. In many Christian circles, the hope of resurrection has been replaced by a Platonic version of a disembodied, spiritualized afterlife. As Bauckham and Hart observe, the “legacy of Platonism” is most clearly evidenced by the “complete spiritualizing of human destiny” despite persistent “dogmatic affirmations of bodily resurrection.”<sup>78</sup> The destiny of humanity has been almost completely severed from the destiny of the rest of creation. The reclamation of the biblical doctrine of resurrection allows for the reimagining of heaven as a part of God’s glorious vision for the future of the cosmos, not as a destination for human souls *away from this world*. This connection between the doctrines of resurrection and heaven was evident in our reading of First Peter. At the beginning of the letter, the author announces that Christians have been given “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). The firm foundation of our hope *is* the historical, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. And yet, there is a future fulfillment, an inheritance that is being kept for us “in heaven” (1:4). The future consummation that the Christian awaits is not an escape from this world *to heaven* where we will receive our inheritance and enjoy eternity in God’s presence, but rather the revealing of Jesus Christ *from heaven* and the ensuing completion and fulfillment of all things (4:7).<sup>79</sup> This distinction is an essential part of what it means to reimagine our eschatological vision. The Platonic vision of a disembodied, purely spiritual, future implies that the present creation has no enduring value or purpose. The promise of resurrection and the future consummation and renewal of all things

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<sup>78</sup> Bauckham and Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 128.

<sup>79</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 25. Moltmann makes the helpful distinction between the words *future* (*futurum*) and *advent* (*adventus*). The former means ‘what will be,’ while the latter means ‘what is coming.’ The eschatological hope described in First Peter seems to embody both these senses.

infuses the present creation with meaning and inherent value, because this world serves as a sign and foretaste of the world to come.

In her essay, “When Up Is Down and Down Is Up: Preaching Heaven and Hell to the Lost Generation,” Karoline Lewis, professor of biblical preaching at Luther Seminary, recounts a recent interview with a young “millennial” named Joanna Flatten. During the course of the interview, Joanna shared that she no longer subscribes to the traditional evangelical summation of the Christian gospel – “*Jesus died for your sins, so you’re going to heaven. Amen.*”<sup>80</sup> Instead, Joanna articulated a vision of the Christian hope in which “the earth we now live in is where God promises heaven.”<sup>81</sup> The interview went on to explore the ways in which the future hope of heaven must be reinterpreted not simply as a transcendent realm *away from this earth*, but also as a transformational reality here and now. A similar vision is expressed in the portion of the Sermon on the Mount traditionally referenced as *The Lord’s Prayer*, in which a petition is made for God’s kingdom to come “on earth as it is in heaven.” The challenge of the postmodern preacher is to break through the centuries-old Platonic worldview that envisions an otherworldly, disembodied “heaven” and to reimagine a future that is firmly rooted in the promises inaugurated through the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, a future that offers hope for *this world*.

*Trajectory3: Preaching Hope for this World.* The preaching of the Christian *telos* and the reimagining of *heaven* as an integral part of God’s holistic plan of salvation naturally leads us to our third trajectory for preaching - the articulation of the implications of eschatology for *this*

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<sup>80</sup> Karoline M. Lewis and Joanna L Flatten, “When Up Is Down and Down Is Up: Preaching Heaven and Hell to the Lost Generation” (*Word & World* 31, no. 1, 2011), 93.

<sup>81</sup> Lewis and Flatten, “When Up Is Down and Down Is Up,” 92.



*world*. Again, Bauckham and Hart provide a helpful summary of the dilemma we face in our contemporary context:

the modern period has witnessed the contrast of traditional Christian other-worldliness, the destiny of the individual in another world beyond death, and the wholly immanent eschatology of evolutionary and historical progress, a secular millenarianism of hope for the race but not the individual. What was largely lost was the hope for a *transcendent* future of *this world*. That is indeed the biblical and Christian hope that has been frequently reaffirmed in recent theology, but has still to capture the imagination of most contemporary Christians.”<sup>82</sup>

Because we have failed to clearly express the *telos* of the Christian life and have correspondingly perpetuated a diminished, other-worldly conception of heaven, the contemporary church lacks the capacity to imagine an eschatology that has meaning and transformative power in the *present*. To meet the challenge of reclaiming our eschatological voice and to proclaim a vibrant *hope for this world*, it is first necessary “to liberate our imagination,” to open ourselves to the possibilities of new life beyond “the closed circle of extant reality.”<sup>83</sup>

In the opening section of First Peter that we explored above, the author is “declaring and celebrating the saving acts of God.”<sup>84</sup> Consequently, this section “is not intended to communicate doctrine,” but to stimulate the imagination of the hearer in order to see the eschatological vision of the future that is meant to shape the life of faith in the present.<sup>85</sup> The central element of First Peter’s eschatological vision for *this world* is hope. As Boring observes, the “understanding of biblical hope in First Peter is a sharp contrast to the cultural use of the word ‘hope’ as a nice way of saying that something might happen, but probably won’t. In

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<sup>82</sup> Bauckham and Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 129-130.

<sup>83</sup> Greenhaw, “Preaching and Eschatology,” 3.

<sup>84</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 60.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

biblical theology, ‘hope’ is the not-yet-reality by which one already lives: a small child a day before Christmas, an engaged couple a week before the wedding, a prisoner a year before release.”<sup>86</sup> In this way, First Peter provides a model of eschatological imagination that is shaped and sustained by the virtue of hope.

However, this hope cannot be disconnected from the experience of suffering that is integral to the Christian life. As we noted above, First Peter offers a profoundly significant commentary on the nature of Christian suffering and exhorts the believer to “rejoice exceedingly” even in the face of the trials and tribulations of this world. The joy experienced in the midst of suffering is not based upon an abstract notion that “someday things will be better,” but upon the robust conviction that “the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (5:10). This is eschatological hope and promise to which the people of God have been called. Yet, as Pannenberg notes, “the application of terms like ‘promise’ and ‘hope’ presupposes some positive correspondence of the future to come to the present reality of our lives.”<sup>87</sup> To preach *hope for this world* is to “participate in the promise that the fullness of God’s *shalom* flows into the present, drawing it to consummation. Eschatological preaching brings the finished work of God to bear on the unfinished world, summoning it to completion.”<sup>88</sup> The challenge we face as preachers is to mitigate against the influence of the dominant other-worldly conception of our Christian eschatological hope and to reaffirm that, even in the midst of suffering, the vision of God’s future for the world is a source of “exceedingly great joy.”

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<sup>86</sup> Boring, *1 Peter*, 65.

<sup>87</sup> Pannenberg, “The Task of Christian Eschatology,” 5.

<sup>88</sup> Long, *Preaching Between Memory and Hope*, 125.

*Trajectory 4. Preaching the Future Now.* Finally, perhaps the most significant trajectory for preaching is the urgent need to proclaim the capacity of eschatology to shape and transform our daily lives as followers of Jesus. As Long argues, “the eschatological and apocalyptic language of the Bible is not about predicting the future; it is primarily a way of seeing the present in the light of hope.”<sup>89</sup> The ability to see the present “in the light of hope” means that we understand every facet of lives as finding its true meaning within the larger story of God’s plan for the world. Our marriages and families; our professions and vocational journeys; our sorrows and joys; our successes and failures - are all caught up in the grand vision of God’s eschatological hope for the world. This is a message our contemporary world desperately needs to hear. As David Lose asserts, “the Sunday sermon is a principal place from which to lend our people the conviction that [...] there is no small or meaningless gesture, and that what we sometimes think of as ‘mundane’ or ‘ordinary’ or even ‘secular’ life is simply bursting with possibility for meaning and purpose.”<sup>90</sup> In the context of the Christian community, we most fully embody of the *present reality* of this eschatological vision through our *worship* and *witness*.

The gathered Christian community is called to be the *eschatological people of God*. Too often we fail to see the eschatological dimension of our communal worship; as Cheryl Bridges Johns notes, we gather for “a disembodied, existential event.”<sup>91</sup> Instead, our Sunday worship should be seen “as an eschatological event, bringing heaven to earth and calling for the day when all creation will join in praise of God.”<sup>92</sup> Through our worship, we bring the mundane and ordinary elements of our lives – money for offering plate, bread for the sacramental meal, canned

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<sup>89</sup> Long, *Preaching Between Memory and Hope*, 129.

<sup>90</sup> Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> Bridges Johns, “*Eschatology*,” 459.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

goods for the local food pantry – and yet these representations of our lives are caught up in the larger vision of hope for the world; our worship becomes a proleptic sign of the completion and fulfillment (*telos*) that one day will be revealed. The foundation of this *eschatological identity* is baptism, which, as First Peter reminds us, is the source of new birth through the resurrection of Jesus (1:3, 3:21). The gathering of the baptized children of God constitutes a new “spiritual house,” a new “priesthood, and a new “nation” (2:5, 9). Preaching the future now means that we recognized and embrace our identity as the *eschatological people of God* that is expressed through our worship.

However, our identity as God’s *eschatological people* is also manifested through our *witness* in the world. The new identity bestowed upon the church through the resurrection was given that we might “proclaim the mighty works of God” (1 Peter 2:9). The call to faithful *witness* is most notably associated with Peter’s exhortation to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (3:15). The defense that Peter calls for is not a rational justification of a certain theological orthodoxy, but rather a faithful *witness* to the experience of eschatological hope in the midst of suffering. This “accounting for hope” must be understood as part of the broader call to imitate Christ, to live as a community that possesses “unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (3:8). To be the *eschatological people of God* means that we are called to be distinct and set apart both in our *worship* and our *witness*. In his book on eschatology, Gayraud S. Wilmore expresses optimism that our faithful proclamation of the Christian hope will lead to “the discovery that what Christians believe about the ‘last things’ may be first in terms of influence upon their behavior in the world.”<sup>93</sup> The challenge of eschatological preaching in our

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<sup>93</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Last Things First* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 11.

contemporary age is to remind people of the ways in which God's future is breaking into the present and to call the church to reclaim its identity as the *eschatological people of God*, that through its *worship* and *witness* the hope of God's future might be made known to the world.

### Conclusion

This project began with the claim that the church is presently ill-equipped to participate in the growing conversation about issues related to eschatology. In spite of the richness of our biblical, liturgy, and theological traditions, we have lost our eschatological voice and consequently, we often fail to effectively communicate the grand vision of God for the future renewal and restoration of the world. We have too often allowed the way the story ends in this age to define its ultimate meaning. When approaching the "room" of modern life, for too long preachers have been offering "strategies for the rearrangement of the furniture," rather than opening "the door to a whole new room" – the new world of the eschaton.<sup>94</sup> And yet, there is a growing number of scholars, theologians, and pastors who are calling for the church to reclaim its eschatological voice and to "help bring about the re-enchantment of post-Enlightenment Christianity."<sup>95</sup>

This project has attempted to contribute to this work of reevaluating our eschatological thinking, reimagining our eschatological vision, and reclaiming our eschatological voice. The conclusions and possible solutions proposed in this essay are rooted in the contextual analysis of my congregation, Good Shepherd Episcopal Church. The ethnographic study of this congregation revealed consistent areas of deficiency regarding the topic of Christian

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<sup>94</sup> Greenhaw, "Preaching and Eschatology," 3.

<sup>95</sup> Bridges Johns, "Eschatology," 460.

eschatology: the lack of clarity regarding the *telos* of the Christian life; confusion concerning the role of heaven in eschatology; a misunderstanding about the implications of eschatology for *this world*; and an inability to connect eschatology to daily life in a meaningful way. Through an exegetical analysis of First Peter, I have attempted to demonstrate that his often-neglected New Testament epistle has the potential to serve as a model for effectively addressing the deficiencies discovered through my congregational analysis and as a source of inspiration for eschatological preaching in the church.<sup>96</sup> As Schlafer and Sedgwick remind us, “preaching has an eschatological character: it celebrates expansively the trajectory of God’s creating-redeeming acts” and rejoices in the “mysterious process of cosmic transformation, at once already accomplished yet still yearned for because imperfectly realized.”<sup>97</sup>

In summary, one of the central themes of this essay and of the epistle of First Peter is *hope*. The *eschatological vision* we are called to proclaim is fundamentally a message of *hope* for the “consummation of God’s cosmic program.”<sup>98</sup> It is the hope that God’s future wields transformative power over the expanse of human history.<sup>99</sup> The early Christian community addressed by the epistle of First Peter is reminded of their new birth into this “living hope.” The understanding of the hope to which we have been called is where the reclamation of our eschatological voice begins. And yet, as one observer reminds us, “preaching eschatologically requires the preacher to be *infused* with this hope.”<sup>100</sup> The infusion of God’s hope empowers us

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<sup>96</sup> *Appendix B*. The outcome of this project has been the creation of a six-part sermon series that could be used during the Easter season (Liturgical Year A). The appendix I have provided includes an overview of the sermon series as well as a sample sermon that could be used during week one of the series.

<sup>97</sup> Schlafer, *Preaching What We Practice*, 75.

<sup>98</sup> Bridges Johns, “Eschatology,” 460.

<sup>99</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 24.

<sup>100</sup> Bridges Johns, “Eschatology,” 460.

to boldly articulate the shape of the Christian *telos*, to reimagine the contours and context of heaven, to declare with confidence the implications of God's future for this world, and to open ourselves to the transforming possibilities of eschatology in our daily lives. To live as a people of hope is to remember that "in the end there is a new beginning."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, ix.

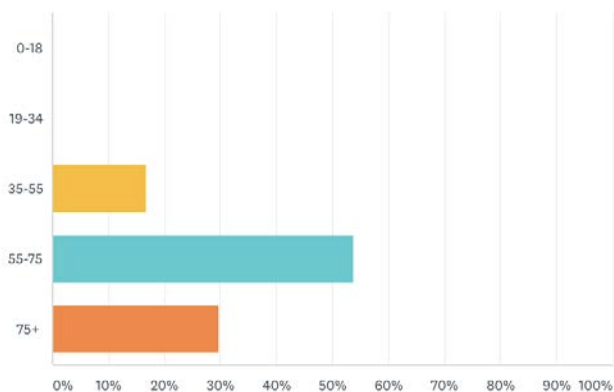
## Appendix A

### *Ethnographic Methodology*

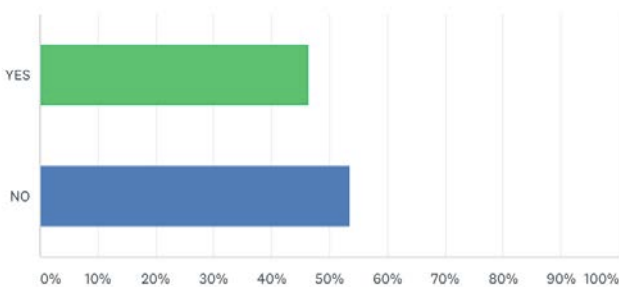
#### *Congregational Survey*

The ethnographic analysis included a congregational survey focused on the concepts of eschatology and Christian hope. The first section of the survey consisted of five *quantitative* questions. The responses to these questions provided insightful statistical information regarding congregational perceptions related to Christian eschatology. The second section of the survey included three *qualitative* questions, which allowed the respondents to provide extended comments and reflections regarding their personal understanding of the Christian hope for the future as well as the possible connections between eschatology and the mission of the church.

#### 1. What is your age?

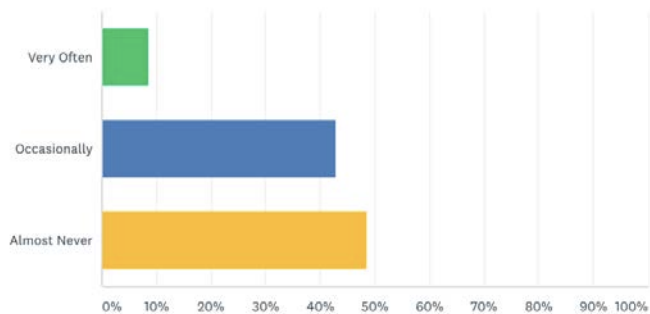


#### 2. Are you familiar with the term *eschatology*?

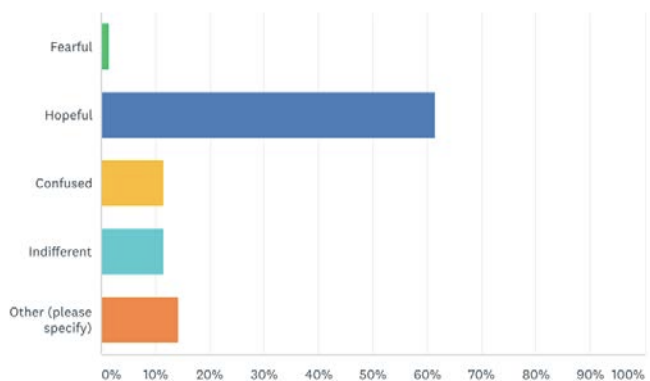




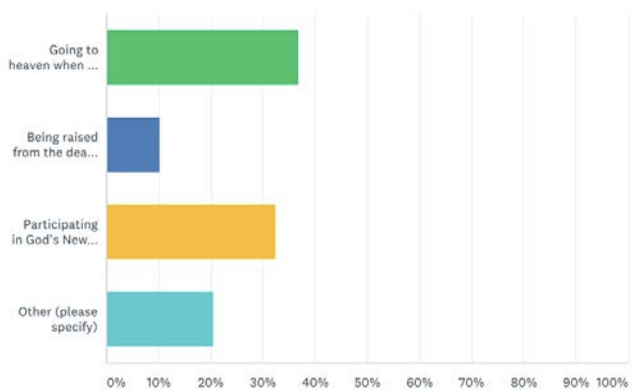
3. How often do you hear sermons or teachings about “the second coming of Jesus” or “the end of the world?”



4. When you think about "the end of the world" or "God's future kingdom," how do feel?



5. Which of the following best describes your understanding of our Christian hope?



6. In your own words, how would you describe our Christian hope for the future?

7. How does this hope influence your daily life as a Christian today?

8. What difference does our future hope make for the mission of the Church?

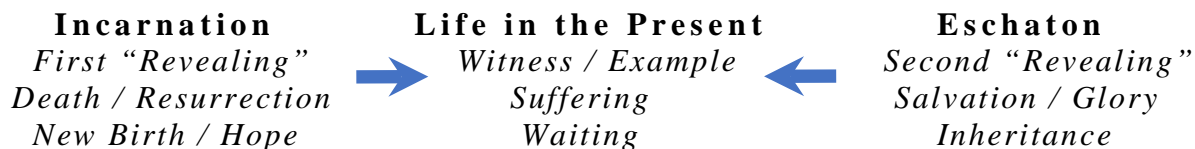
*Congregational Bible Studies*

In addition to the congregational survey describe above, I also conducted two Bible studies focused on the theme of biblical eschatology. The first Bible study – entitled *What is our Christian Hope?* – consisted of seven sessions and explored general concepts related to Biblical eschatology.

Isaiah 11:1-9	<i>The Promise</i>
Joel 2:1-14	<i>The Day of the Lord</i>
Romans 8:18-25/Acts 3:20-21	<i>The Waiting</i>
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18	<i>The Rapture?</i>
1 Corinthians 15:35-58	<i>The Resurrection</i>
Matthew 25:31-46	<i>The Judgment</i>
Revelation 21:1-8	<i>The New Creation</i>

This scope of this study was designed as an introduction to the language and imagery associated with our Christian hope as well as the diversity of voices related to eschatology within the Bible.

The second Bible study was specifically focused the Epistle of First Peter. Over the course of six weeks, the group studied First Peter with a particular emphasis on the eschatology of the letter and the implications for our daily lives. The following chart represents the overall vision of eschatology presented in First Peter, which served as a guide for our study of the letter.



The group discussed the central theological concepts found in First Peter, such as hope, holiness, cultural assimilation, suffering, and spiritual discipline. The format of each session included

exegetical analysis of key terms, comparisons between various biblical translations, and theological reflection on important concepts.

### *Focus Groups*

The Bible studies described above focused specifically on the biblical text and provided an opportunity for in-depth conversation regarding the exegetical and theological issues related to the eschatology of First Peter. However, I also assembled two focus groups, which gathered to discuss general perceptions and assumptions regarding the topic of eschatology. The first focus group was held during the day and consisted of mainly older retirees. The second focus group was held in the evening as part of our weekly youth gathering, so the majority of participants were middle and high school students. The conversations in each group focused on the following questions:

1. What is eschatology?
2. What are some models of eschatology you see present in our current culture?
3. How does your vision of eschatology inform or shape your life in the present?
4. How does eschatology shape your understanding of the mission of the church?
5. How does eschatology shape your sense of ethics and moral responsibility?

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The congregational survey was conducted using *Survey Monkey*, a free online resource that also includes basic statistical analysis tools. The graphs provided above were generated utilizing the online software provided by *Survey Monkey*. A total of eighty members of the congregation participated in the survey and a printed record is available of each individual response. The Bible study and focus groups were conversational in nature; however, I maintained detailed field notes from each meeting, which provided important insights regarding

common perceptions and assumptions regarding eschatology. The analysis provided in Section One of my project is primarily based on the written survey results, which is supported and supplemented by the information gleaned from the Bible study and focus groups.

## **Appendix B**

### *Sample Sermon Series*

The project that I have completed includes an ethnographic study of my congregational context, an exegetical analysis of First Peter, and the development of four trajectories for preaching and the work of reclaiming our eschatological voice in Christian proclamation. I have developed the following sermon series to serve an example of what the implementation of these trajectories might look like when applied to the practice of crafting a sermon. I have selected six passages from the Epistle of First Peter. These six passages appear in the Revised Common Lectionary during the Easter season of liturgical year A. The Easter season is a highly appropriate time during the church year to preach on themes of eschatology, since the resurrection of Jesus on Easter and the outpouring of Spirit on Pentecost are the two most important signs of God's *future* breaking into the *present* reality of our world. Below I have provided an outline of the possible eschatological themes that could be developed in each of the six sermons as well as a full sample text of a sermon for week one of the series.

#### **Week One: A Living Hope**

1 Peter 1:3-9 – *Easter 2A*

The opening sermon in this series should naturally connect to the themes of the Easter celebrations that occurred just one week before. The passage appointed for the Second Sunday of Easter is drawn from the introduction to the Epistle of First Peter, which expresses the central themes of the letter, including the dominant theme of *hope*. Drawing on this theme of hope, the sermon should direct the listener to reflect on the nature of this hope. Is it a *hope* that is rooted in the notion that one day we will escape from this world and dwell with God eternally in the heavens? Or is it a *hope* that has real meaning for our present reality and that will one day find its

fulfillment when Jesus is revealed at the “end of the age?” This opening sermon in the series should draw upon the *trajectories* for preaching eschatology that were explored above. We have been given a new birth into a *living hope*, which is both a present reality and the future goal toward which the Christian life is oriented.

### **Sample Sermon: *What are we hoping for?***

Just one week ago we gathered to celebrate the resurrection – the victory of light over darkness, of hope over despair, of life over death. Just one week ago, the shout of “Alleluia!” echoed off the walls of this sanctuary as the unspeakable joy of God’s love reverberated within the chambers of our hearts. Just one week ago we were basking in the power and glory of the resurrection. But a lot can change in a week! How quickly the sense of joy and fulfillment we experience on Easter Sunday gives way to the normalcy and mundaneness of everyday life. How quickly the reverberation of our “Alleluia” acclamations fades into the monotone monotony of work or school or simply making ends meet. How quickly the power and glory of the resurrection is pushed aside by the busyness and distractions of daily existence. Nevertheless, we are called to be a resurrection people, not just one day a year, but every moment of every day. In spite of the fact that we so quickly move on from our Easter celebrations, we are a resurrection people and to be a resurrection people is to be a people of *hope*!

As we heard in our reading from First Peter, “through the resurrection of Jesus” we have been given new birth into a living hope.” Peter is writing to the fledgling Christian community in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century, and he is reminding them of their fundamental identity that they have received through the resurrection of Jesus. This community of believers is learning how to live out their faith in the midst of a resistant and hostile cultural environment.

This is a community that has suffered various trials and is struggling to be faithful even in the face of suffering. It is this context, that Peter declares, “you have been given a new birth into a living hope.” And for the Christian community to which Peter is writing, this “living hope” is both a *present reality* and their *future goal*.

The promise of a living hope is a *present reality* because of what God has accomplished through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Our joyful declaration, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” is a declaration of hope. It is a declaration that in spite of the trials and tribulations we encounter in this world, there is hope! It is a declaration that even in the face of terrorism and war, there is hope! It is a declaration that even when we witness the pain and grief brought about by senseless acts of violence in our schools or churches, there is hope! And this hope is not lofty platitude simply meant to sooth our anxiety. Nor is it just wishful thinking, a generic optimism that one day things will get better. The hope that we profess is rooted in the conviction that God has acted through the resurrection of Jesus to bring about a new order of things. In fact, the change brought about by the resurrection is so dramatic and transformational that the only image Peter can think of to describe it is the image of something being born, something brand new being brought forth into the world! The promise of a living hope is a *present reality* because the resurrection of Jesus has changed everything!

But that same hope is also our *future goal*. Our hope is rooted in the conviction that one day Jesus will be revealed and the fullness of salvation will be made known in all the world. As Peter reminds his community, we have been born again into an “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven.” Now most of us, when we hear about our inheritance being located in heaven automatically think about going to heaven when we die. We have all been taught, from Sunday School onward, that heaven is a destination away from this world and

that one day we will escape the suffering and pain of this present world in order to be with God forever in heaven. But what if heaven isn't a destination away from this world, but a dimension of reality that is as close to us as the air we breathe? What if our future hope is not to escape from this world *to heaven*, but rather to wait for the revealing of Jesus *from heaven* and the ultimate completion and fulfillment of all things. This may be a whole new way of thinking about God's future for the world. We have grown so accustomed to thinking about *heaven* as the goal toward which we are striving. But what if the goal is coming to us? What if our hope is the promise that God is coming to us and through Christ, God will make all things new?

It is this kind of hope that sustained and strengthened the Christian community to which Peter wrote his letter nearly two thousand years ago. It is this kind of hope that empowered the countless throngs of faithful saints who have gone before us to be bold in their witness to the truth. And it is this hope that sustains you and me in the midst of the brokenness and pain of this world. Several years ago, there was a well-known British Rabbi named Hugo Gryn who told a story from his childhood that took place while he and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz. Hugo and his family were Orthodox Jews, and even though it meant great danger to them, Hugo's father insisted they celebrate the Sabbath and other festivals. Hugo remembered the time when his father, in order to observe the Sabbath, took a piece of string, placed it in a slice of butter, and lit it to make a *shabat* candle. Hugo was furious and protested, "Father, that is all the butter we have!" His father said, "Without food we can live for weeks. But we can't live for a minute without hope."<sup>102</sup> In the midst of the pain and brokenness of this world, it is hope that sustains us. Not wishful thinking. Not a generic optimism that one day things will get better. But

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<sup>102</sup> Long, *Preaching Between Memory and Hope*, 132.



a deep, abiding trust that God is at work in the world and that one day the fullness of our salvation, the wholeness we so desperately long for will be a reality.

And so, the sights and sounds of our Easter liturgies may have come and gone. The echo of our “Alleluia” acclamation from one week ago may be growing faint. But we are nevertheless called to be a resurrection people and a people of hope. We are called through our baptismal covenant to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. We are called to proclaim to the world that there is the promise of new life. And the promise of new life that we have received in Christ begins here and now in the reality of our daily lives, but it also points us toward that day when Jesus will be revealed and all things will be made new. This our message – to remind that world we can live without almost anything – but we can’t live for a minute without hope.

The sermon series would continue through the season of Easter in the following manner.

**Week Two: Before the Foundation of the World**

1 Peter 1:17-23 – *Easter 3A*

**Week Three: The Shepherd and Guardian of Your Souls**

1 Peter 2:19-25 – *Easter 4A*

**Week Four: Living Stones**

1 Peter 2:1-10 – *Easter 5A*

**Week Five: Defend the Hope that is in You**

1 Peter 3:8-22 – *Easter 6A*

**Week Six: Do Not be Surprised**

1 Peter 4:12-5:11 – *Easter 7A*

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